

*Bodhi Leaf Publication No. 28*

# Escapism & Escape Buddhism & Mysticism

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*Y. M. Rao*



**BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY**

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By

**Y. M. Rao**

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# Escapism and Escape

**H**ow does one really distinguish between these two words? The dictionary meanings are pretty clear—"Escape" is the emerging from bondage into freedom, "Escapism" is flight from reality. If all of us were agreed on what is reality and what is bondage, the millennium would be here now; but in the world as it is, the materialists sneer at the religious people because they (the materialists) know that everything in this world is conditioned and it is escapist nonsense to talk of "The Unconditioned." The religious people on the other hand look at the materialists with pity as these poor fellows escape into their earthly paradise of "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die", and they do not have the courage or even the desire to think of the possibility of a hereafter. But the fruitfulness of the materialist doctrine seen in the triumphs of science has made the religious people less sure of themselves—this is seen in their attempts to show how very scientific their own religion is, thus unconsciously accepting the canons of science as the criteria for all reasonable thinking. Every religious philosophy must stand or fall on its own merits as a complete system. It is irrelevant to show, for instance,

that both science and Buddhism take their stand on causality and that both find no use for words like “soul” and “substance”: for, when it comes to Kamma or moral causation the Buddhist has to part company with the scientist, because the latter finds no use for this word either. The danger of eclecticism is that, ultimately, we may pretend to see in the teachings of the Blessed One fundamental ideas never taught by him.

I am here laying emphasis on the eclectic tendencies shown by the followers of the Dhamma in recent times, because the inroads made by philosophies alien to the spirit of the Dhamma can be seen even in the pages of Buddhist magazines. To take an instance, a certain author writes: “All sublimations, substitutions and repressions are temporary escapes which bring in their train more aches and disease. To control the mind according to a certain pattern or mould is simply to imprison it; there is no freedom in such devices. It is by passive and alert observation of the ways of the mind without condemnation or justification that the mind could experience a stillness and freedom not bound to time.” These views are reenforced by another writer in a book review where the writer thinks that the practice of mindfulness of in-breathing and out-breathing is good to start with, but one must rise above it to exercise choiceless awareness in regard

to the working of one's own mind. Compare the statements of these two writers with the following extracts from the scriptures:

“What now is the effort to avoid? There, the disciple incites his will to avoid the arising of evil, unwholesome things that have not yet arisen, and he strives, puts forth his energy, strains his mind and struggles . . . he watches over his senses, restrains his senses” (A. IV 13).

“If those monks, O monks, who are learners, who have not yet attained to that unsurpassed security from bondage, were to dwell developing and making much of the samadhi of inbreathing and out breathing, it will be conducive to the attainment of the destruction of the Asavas” (SN 54:12).

It would be worthwhile to enquire into the philosophy whence these new ideas, so diametrically opposed to those of the Buddha, have been adopted. I am referring to the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti. This is a highly original philosophy, compact and independent, with but a superficial resemblance to the Dhamma. The point I wish to make is that the exercise of choiceless awareness of the workings of one's own mind is an integral part of this new philosophy and it cannot be adopted as a method of meditation practice

without admitting by implication that the Dhamma as taught by the Blessed One is either incomplete and therefore capable of improvement, or that it is, like other religions, escapist. If, in anyone's view, it is indeed escapist, the right thing to do is to give it up rather than pay lip sympathy to it.

In the interests of clarity of thought, I shall try to state in brief the substance of Krishnamurti's philosophy and then attempt an analysis. If by any chance I have made any misstatements, I am always open to correction. As I understand it, it is as follows:

The world is a chaos because of our greed, ambition, ill will and fear. To make this a better world we either join organisations if we are inclined towards social work or politics, or turn towards Gurus if religiously inclined, hoping that by these means we can accomplish our ends. We do not realise that the individual is the world, and if the individual were without greed or ambition there could be no chaos in the world. In our attempts to solve the problem, we create two kinds of hierarchies—the outer, consisting of individuals who are social, political or religious leaders to whom we turn for guidance, and an inner hierarchy of values by which everything is judged and arranged according to values. Neither the outer nor the inner hierarchies are of any use since they merely help to distort our minds' perception of reality.

The mind depends upon two kinds of memories—one, the factual, which is essential for the purpose of making a living and carrying on our daily routines, and the other, the psychological memory which thinks of things in terms of values and hence of arranging everything according to some pattern. This pattern, which is built on the memories of past experiences, blurs and distorts our vision of reality. But reality is ever new and we interpret the new in terms of the old, and hence we never see reality as it is. By comparing other peoples' possessions or intelligence or status with one's own, one develops envy, ambition, greed etc., and therefore one lives either regretting the past or hoping or fearing for the future, but never living in the living present. Even the future we conjure up is but a projection of the past—thus we either find life dull because we ever see the old, or we are frustrated because we are unable to free ourselves from the bondage of the old. Therefore we set out to attain the real and think we can do it by means of self-discipline and a gradual process of modification of the self. But, in reality, there is no such thing as a self. It is a creation of the thoughts in search of security in a world that can never give security. Psychological memories strengthen this imaginary self, because everything is thought of in terms of "me" and "mine."

Self-discipline which is meant to transform the self



merely ends up by strengthening it still further. Why is reality not attainable through a course of self-discipline? Because reality has no abode, no beginning, no end, it is not related to time and hence cannot be “attained” by a process which is based on the thought “I shall gradually discipline myself and next year or in my next birth I shall attain reality.” Reality is to be discovered from moment to moment and there can be no set pattern or way or method of attaining it in time. Meditation can help in this, but meditation is not concentration since concentration is but inverted distraction, an attempt to fit the mind into a pattern.

True meditation is where the mind watches with attention its own workings without condemnation or justification, because in this way one breaks away from the bonds of psychological memory. One does not even analyse the thoughts, because to analyse is to divide the mind into two compartments—the analyser and the analysed. In the absence of psychological memory, the mind becomes truly integrated because now there is no conflict between unconscious longings and conscious taboos. Such a mind becomes alert, simple, innocent, and in a position to experience the real without the haze of memory to obscure the vision. With such a mind one sees the greed and violence in the world and immediately drops the greed and

violence in oneself, not in time but instantaneously. Such a mind does not look for results but thinks rightly because it is the right thing to do. It does not even “practise choiceless awareness” because to practise is to postpone for the morrow something that can be discovered here and now.

In the above philosophy, we instantly perceive striking resemblances to the Dhamma. There is recognition of the chaos of the world (*dukkha*), its cause is traced to greed, ill will etc. (*Dukkha samudaya*), that it is possible to make an end of it (*dukkha nirodha*) though there is no set way to its ending. But reality is timeless (*akāliko*), to be discovered from moment to moment (*sandiṭṭhiko*), to be realised by oneself (*paccattaṃ veditabbo*). But the differences are no less striking—any kind of effort or discipline whatsoever leads to strengthening of the self, and that anything other than choiceless awareness is not true meditation.

With so much in common, where exactly do they disagree? Both start by accepting the fact of *Dukkha* and both trace its origin to men’s greed, ill will and stupidity, but they part company when tracing the origin of greed and ill will. The Dhamma teaches that it is due to not realising the impermanence of all conditioned things with thoughts of “me” and “mine.” Krishnamurti thinks it is due to our habit of

comparing, contrasting, judging, condemning and justifying things—in other words, of assigning values to things, this valuation being based on the emotional residue clinging to our memories of events. He says we compare ourselves with others and thus allow envy to be born; we constantly judge things—“this is good, this is bad”, “this is better, and this is worse.” In the world of facts, as in the world of science, the division is between the true and the false only, and not between the better and the worse. He traces the conflicts in the mind due to the conscious mind judging all longings arising from the unconscious as good or bad, justifying the good and condemning the bad, thus creating “a house divided.” But if Krishnamurti’s analysis be taken seriously, then the very values with which he starts and on which he founds his philosophy vanish disconcertingly as a result of this analysis.

If we never contrasted chaos with order, greed with benevolence and ill will with loving kindness, we could never come to the conclusion that the world is in chaos due to greed and ill will. What I mean will become clearer if I point out that his error is a semantic one. He appears to think that words like “chaos”, “greed”, “ill will” etc. have two kinds of content—a factual content and an emotional content. He appears to think that if we ignore the purely

emotional content of these words we shall be able to arrive at the purely factual content—thus making it possible for us to see things as they are. But this is a fallacy. The science of semantics shows us that words like “chaos” in Krishnamurti’s sense or words like “greed”, “ill will” etc. have absolutely no factual content. They are all what are known as “coloured” words, the colouring being given by our emotions. Let me illustrate this by analysing our attitude towards the act of killing. When we disapprove of it, we call it “murder”, and when we approve of it, we call it “war.” But if we remove the emotional content from these words it is impossible to say whether killing should be permitted or not.

That the chaos in this world should be removed, that humanity must be saved, are all decisions that can be arrived at only with reference to what we, as human beings feel, about humanity. Nature, because she has no emotions, saves as well as kills all impartially. Only human beings can be compassionate and loving because of their emotions.

“Chaos”, in a scientific sense, is a term to denote the state to which all organised systems tend in time. It has nothing to do with the “chaos” of Krishnamurti. If we remove the emotional contents of the words “greed” and “ill will”, they would turn into empty shells. People behave towards each other in certain

ways—when we approve of them we use words like “benevolence” and “kindness”, and if we disapprove of them we use the words “greed” and “ill will”—but this approval as well as disapproval are themselves based on emotional valuation. If all our so-called psychological memories were wiped out we would certainly see things as they are, but not as wise human beings would do, but as cameras and tape-recorders would do. It is impossible to have fellow-feelings with other living beings without having recourse to our emotional nature. In one of his talks, he says that the beauty of the present sunset is spoiled by the memory of past sunsets. If we had no memory of past sunsets, if we had never classified things as beautiful and ugly, if we never had preferred one combination of colours to another, then our talk of the “beauty” of the present sunset would lose all meaning.

Besides, Krishnamurti’s attitude towards judgment and comparison cannot be consistently maintained. In every talk purporting to show the ills arising out of analyses and comparisons, one finds detailed analyses and comparisons of the motives of gurus and politicians. If he were not carried away by his theories he would have perceived that not all psychological memories with their judgments and comparisons distort reality—for, if that were so, he must admit that when he speaks of “Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics or

some such other silly sect," he is resorting to distortion of reality.

To come to the "piece de resistance" of his philosophy which appeals to so many of our present-day intellectuals—his "choiceless awareness of the working of one's own mind", "the watching of the workings of one's own mind without condemnation, justification or analysis." This is supposed to "integrate the mind" by removing the conflict between the conscious and unconscious states of the mind.

Let us try to understand this with the help of a parable. Suppose an evil faction has taken over reins of government in a state. There is a natural conflict between the rulers and the ruled, and there are sporadic revolts ruthlessly suppressed by the rulers. Then a wise man arises among the people and proposes a solution that is astounding in its simplicity. The conflict, he tells the people, is simply because we sit in judgment over the acts of the rulers; we approve of some of their acts and disapprove of others. But if the people refused to condemn or justify or even to analyse the acts of the rulers, it would create a marvellous integration of the state. There would be no conflict and the people would be in direct touch with reality. I do not know whether this method of integration appealed to the foolish people of the state, but there are many clever people to whom the parallel

method for the integration of the mind appeals very strongly. In short, it is the art of resolving a problem by ignoring its existence.

We can judge the worth of this philosophy by applying it to the animal world: there is no conflict here between the conscious and the unconscious, there is no invention here of a self to be the secure centre of an insecure world, nor is there a classification here of “better” and “worse”—has that made the animal world less chaotic? The palpitating heart of a deer as it leaps at the crackle of a twig and the terrible fangs of the tiger sunk in the bloody entrails of its victim give an emphatic no to this view. It is not because we judge and compare that we have a distorted view of reality, but because we judge and compare wrongly. It is not because we think of things as good and bad that there is misery in this world, but because we have not worked out the right criteria by which to judge what is good and what is bad.

How does one truly integrate the mind? It is a psychological fact that repression drives the evil down into the unconscious—but repression takes place only when the mind is not alert and allows the wrong sorts of emotion to overwhelm one. But when the mind is alert and steadfast, all the repressed thoughts come up into the conscious, and if these thoughts are one by one calmly analysed, an inner transformation takes

place and one finds one's evil tendencies gradually attenuated. Compare the historical parallel of the conflict between Asoka and the Kalingas having been resolved by the spiritual conversion of Asoka. Krishnamurti's criticism of one who undertakes discipline so as to postpone having to give up the violence in his heart now, is valid if the man is capable of understanding in himself the process of the arising of violence and yet refuses to drop the violence instantly. But what of those who are sincerely groping after such an understanding? One of Krishnamurti's listeners once confessed at a meeting in Madras that after years of listening to him, he had seen no change in himself—thus showing that a man may listen sincerely for years without developing the understanding; perhaps a course of disciplined thinking would have helped him.

To say that any kind of effort or discipline leads to the strengthening of the self is distortion of facts. The Blessed One realised that clinging to the five constituents as "this is mine, this am I, this is my self" gave rise to greed, ill will and stupidity and hence advised the discipline of regarding everything as "this is not mine, this am I not, this is not my self." No amount of analysis can reveal in this discipline any element conducive to the strengthening of the self.

Another catchy little phrase that beguiles is that



reality is timeless and “the timeless cannot be attained in time,” but instantaneously. But even an instant is an instant in time, and if reality cannot be attained in time, it cannot be attained at all. But if reality can be “discovered”, as he himself puts it, then it can certainly be discovered in time, for, conditioning is a process that has arisen in time and therefore can be put an end to in time.

In the end, I wish to say that with all the moral and religious fervour that pervades his talks, the spirit of Krishnamurti’s philosophy is essentially alien to the spirit of the Dhamma. All said and done, I must concede that each man accepts what appears to him to be reasonable, but that should not lead to turning the Dhamma into an eclectic religion—or should it? “Whatever was said by the Buddha” they used to say, “is well said.” But to alter this statement to “Whatever is well said must have been said by the Buddha” is either a sign of degeneration or a sign of “growth and development”—one of these is certainly a path of escape and the other of escapism. Which one is which I leave to the predilection of the reader.

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# Buddhism and Mysticism

The word Mysticism is used here not in the general sense of ineffable religious experience, but in the narrower sense of a special interpretation of it according to which “The phenomenal world of matter and of individualised consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a divine ground within which all partial realities have their being and apart from which they would be non-existent.” [1] The mystic asserts in other words that there is a highest reality called variously the Absolute, the Godhead, Brahman etc., and the world around us is a manifestation of this Absolute and what the mystic feels during his ecstasy is an awareness of the identity of the individual self with the Absolute or Great Self. Many great scholars, wise in the ways of mystics all the world over, have tried to show that the Buddha also was a mystic in this sense; that though he was silent about Brahman the idea peeps out, they say, in such words as *brahmacariya*, *brahmavihāra*, *brahmacakka*, and *brahmabhūta* (translated by them as god-fearing, god-abiding, the Wheel of God, and become-Brahma). One

occidental scholar has even gone so far as to accuse the wicked Theravadin monks of deliberately suppressing all references to Atman and Brahman from their scriptures. Some other scholars have conveniently translated the Pali word Atta by the words “SELF” or “Self” to suit their theories. Such “higher criticism” by which one can see anywhere what one fondly wishes to see must be a pleasant task. Here I intend to attempt a lower and more humdrum type of criticism, and in the process I may possibly tread on some pet corns.

To begin with let us read a description of mystic experience, shorn to all interpretations, from the pen of a sceptic: “. . . it brings an unusually precise and poignant awareness both of my present surroundings and of things remote in space and in time. It seems to be simply a very comprehensive act of attention, an attending to everything at once. And in response to all that this act of attention reveals I feel a very special emotion, which I can describe only as a tension of fervour and peace.” [2] Such a vision is described in the Pali scriptures as “the pure and stainless eye of truth” and invariably the only comment accompanying this vision is:

“Whatsoever is of an originating nature is subject to cessation.”

Compared with this restrained and truly Buddhist

statement of facts we have picturesque and glowing accounts by the mystics:

“For he was then one with God, and retained no difference, either in relation to himself or to others.” [3]

“All at once . . . , an astonishing radiance welled up on all the familiar things and in the child herself. They were no longer just themselves, separate objects with edges of their own; they were that radiance.” [4]

But the most illuminating of all such statements is by the sceptic Stapledon himself:

“In spite of all the frustration and horror of the human world, I am at these times perfectly sure that all our suffering and all our baseness is somehow needed, not for our personal salvation, for of this I know nothing, but for the rightness of the universe as a whole.” [5]

Here we see clearly the difference between the Buddhist and mystical interpretations of the religious experience. The Buddhist is aware, in the clarity of his vision, only of the impermanence of all component things, while the mystic identifies himself with the life-affirming forces of the universe thought of as

concentrated in an Absolute which is the fountainhead of all life. When the Bodhisattva sat under the Bodhi tree, Mārā attacked him with all forms of horrors and temptations; and perhaps the mystic interpretation was the subtlest and most potent temptation of all and the hardest to reject.

Certain conclusions are inevitable if we accept this mystical interpretation. If the Absolute is the fountainhead of the whole world as well as of all the living things in it, then all the evil in the world also has risen from the same source; and Stapledon's conclusion that all the frustration and horror of the world are "somehow necessary for the rightness of the universe as a whole" is the only proper conclusion. We must love all living beings because all life is one and the same Universal Principle pervades them all, the mystics tell us. If this is so there are other conclusions that can equally well be drawn: for, Krishna tells Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā—"He who regardeth this (Atman) as a slayer and he who thinks he is slain, both of them are ignorant. He slayeth not, nor is he slain." (II.19)

The logic is unanswerable. If the Atman is neither the slayer nor the slain then it does not matter in the least whether you love or slay other beings. As a matter of fact, the main purpose of the Bhagavadgītā was to induce Arjuna to kill his cousins and teachers

in warfare. The mystic cannot be consistent—he has no valid answer for the ills of the world since ultimately everything arose out of the Absolute. Aldous Huxley with all his enthusiasm for the Perennial Philosophy is forced to supplement it by adding—“Some actions are intrinsically evil or inexpedient, and no good Intentions, no conscious offering of them to God, no renunciation of the fruits can alter their essential character.” [6] The appeal to *avijjā* as the cause of the feeling of separateness from each other and from the Absolute is vain since *avijjā* (ignorance) in the form of *māyā* is an essential power of the Godhead, or as the Bhagavadgītā says it: “The lord dwelleth in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, by his illusive power (*māyā*) causing all beings to revolve as though mounted on a potter’s wheel,” (VIII.61) or as Stapledon put it, all the suffering and baseness are needed for the “rightness” of the world as a whole.

If the mystical philosophy were to be made the basis of a philosophy of life, then we shall have to accept the world as it is, with all its lust, hatred and delusion, and throw overboard all ethical considerations. If we look at all ethical and humanist ideals we see that they are essentially attempts by man to curb his normal life-affirming instincts to kill, to acquire property, to have promiscuous sexual satisfaction, to lie and chatter and to fuddle his brains to escape having to

face the hard facts of life, ideas that form the basis of the *Pañca-sīla*. And all ethical systems are failures to the extent they come to terms with the life-affirming forces.

It may be objected that some of the greatest saints of the world have been mystics and they have been the personifications of loving kindness. But this is the greatest of tragedies—that even those who overcame their life-affirming instincts and were imbued with love for all living beings finally fell victim to Mārā’s greatest and subtlest of temptations. They are a warning to us of the tragic consequences of renunciation unaccompanied by *paññā* (wisdom). The Buddhist Arahāt in renouncing everything finds nothing at all with which he can identify himself saying “I am this” and, without attempting to reconcile the good with the bad, sees things as they are; the mystical saint begins by renouncing everything but ends up by identifying himself with the very source of everything saying “I am Brahman” because this alone reconciles him to life and gives him peace of mind. The Pali scriptures contain several examples of warnings against Mārā’s subtlest trap; the most telling to my mind is at Majjhima Sutta 49 wherein the Buddha pays a visit to Brahma who says of the world of which he is ruler:

“Here is the eternal, here is the persistent, here

is the everlasting, here is indissolubility and immutability, here there is no birth, nor old age, nor death, nor passing away and reappearance; and another, higher liberation there is not.”

And Mārā entering into one of the devas says to the Buddha:

“O monk, beware of him, he is Brahma, the omnipotent, the invincible, the all-seeing, the sovereign, the lord, the creator, the preserver, the father of all that has been and of all that will be ...”

The Buddha’s reply contains the warning to all would-be mystics:

“Well I know you, Malign One, abandon your hope: ‘He knows me not’; you are Mārā the Malign. And this Brahma here, O Malign One, these gods of Brahma, these celestial companies of Brahma, they are all in your hand, they are all in your power. You, O Malign One, certainly think: ‘He also must be in my power!’ I, however, O Malign One, am not in your hand, I am not in your power.”

The conclusion to be drawn from this is clear. Even the



Isvara, “the Creator and Preserver”, is in the hands of Mārā for the simple reason that Avidya, the basis of lust for life, is the creator and preserver of the world. But *avijjā* in Buddhism is not the Causeless Cause of Samsara; it is a simple ignorance of the Four Noble Truths of Suffering.

Nowhere in the whole of the Pali scriptures do you find Nirvana, the Buddhist Absolute, described as the ground of all existence. On the contrary, it is described as the very negation of all life affirmation; either simply as “the destruction of lust, of hatred, of delusion,” or more elaborately:

“There is, monks, a condition wherein there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor the sphere of the void, nor the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception: where there is no “this world” and no “world beyond;” where there is no moon and no sun. That condition, monks, do I call neither a coming nor a going nor a standing still nor a falling away nor a rising up: but it is without fixity, without mobility, without basis. That is the end of woe.”

If all life is one, this oneness must be most in evidence when many people congregate. It would be interesting to know what it is that is common to all living beings. Jung’s analytical psychology tell us it is the collective

unconscious with its archetypes; and when people in whom the same archetype is active collect together, it drives them to act in an irrational way. This accounts for the brutal behaviour of large mobs, and even normally quiet and well-behaved people have been known to perpetrate unheard of atrocities while participating in the activities of mobs. “ . . . even a collection of highly intelligent people will act at a much lower level of intelligence than its individual members, and Jung once said bitingly that a hundred intelligent heads added up to a hydrocephalus.” [7] Thus that which is common to all living beings is not so much the Atman, as the lust for life. It is for this reason that the Buddha showed his greatness as a psychologist when, in the quintessence of the Dhamma given to the nun Gotami, He said “of whatsoever teaching thou art sure that it leads to . . . the love of society and not to the love of solitude . . . that is not the Dhamma, that is not the Vinaya, that is not the teaching of the Master.”

The Arahant pervades all beings with thoughts of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity not because “all life is one”, not because “the Atman dwells in all beings”, but because in him the negative virtues of Pañca-sila have fully flowered into the positive virtues of brahmavihara ; and to think such thoughts is as much his nature as it is for the sun

to shine—or as the Itivuttaka puts it:

“Just as, monks, in the last month of the rains, in autumn time, when the sky is opened up and cleared of clouds, the sun, leaping up into the firmament, drives away all darkness from the heavens and shines and burns and flashes forth—even so, monks, whatsoever grounds there be for good works undertaken with a view to rebirth, all of them are not one-sixteenth part of that loving kindness which is the heart’s release; loving kindness alone, which is the heart’s release shines and burns and flashes forth in surpassing them.”

# Notes

1. Aldous Huxley at p. 13 of *Bhagavad-Gita* by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, Mentor Religious Classic. [\[Back\]](#)
2. From Olaf Stapledon's *Saints and Revolutionaries* quoted in *The Physical Basis of Personality* by V. H. Mottram, Pelican Book A 139, p. 163. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Plotinus, quoted in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* by S. Radhakrishnan, p. 50. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Lady Acland at p. 154 of *Physical Basis of Personality*, op, cit. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Ibid, p. 167. [\[Back\]](#)
6. *Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Prabhavananda, op. cit., p. 20. [\[Back\]](#)
7. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology* by Freda Fordham. Pelican Book, A 273, p. 118 [\[Back\]](#)

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